STUDY GUIDE

THE NIAGARA REPORT

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The Niagara Report, 1987

Anglican-Lutheran International Commission

Prepared by Darlis J. Swan, Ph.D.

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Foreword

Though it has been five years since the Niagara Report on Episcope was completed, it continues to play a role in official conversations between Anglicans and Lutherans in a variety of contexts. With this Study Guide, we hope the Niagara Report can become more accessible to various study groups of Anglicans and Lutherans, thus contributing to an atmosphere conducive to furthering the reality of communion between us.

The Study Guide has been prepared by Darlis J. Swan, Ph.D., a member of the Department for Ecumenical Affairs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and we are grateful for her contribution.

The Anglican-Lutheran International Commission called for the study guide in full awareness that to be of use in the various parts of the world, it would have to be translated into languages other than English and adapted to differing cultural and historical contexts.

We therefore encourage our churches where English is not widely spoken to translate what follows and, keeping within the spirit of the original, to adapt it for local use. The study guide is not copyrighted; we issue it as a model for local endeavors.

Study groups of Anglicans and Lutherans in local parishes can help bring our churches together at the level of their most basic expression. We commend this guide for such use as together we continue to break down the barriers which have separated our churches, in obedience to the will of the Savior "that they may all be one."

Donald Anderson,
Anglican Consultative Council

Eugene L. Brand,
Lutheran World Federation

Introduction

Where do ecumenical or theological agreements fit in a world rent apart by confusion, suffering, and pain - a world where inequity seems to be the rule and harmony only a few anticipated moments of grace? Although the technical language of such documents may appear to be an insurmountable barrier to some, these documents represent more than the theological language in which they are drafted. They represent careful scholarship, a cadre of theologians with expertise in a given field, and a history of community building that has allowed dialogue participants to express their identity in a particular way and to challenge their churches to move toward fuller unity.

The *Niagara Report* represents the fruits of a series of Anglican-Lutheran dialogues over more than twenty years that sought to find commonality in doctrine, worship, mission, and the understanding of ministry. (See the Introduction to the *Niagara Report* for a history of these reports, paragraphs 1-10.) Those years of dialogue enabled Lutherans and Anglicans to discover what they share and permitted them to cease wallowing in their differences and move ahead toward a realization of full communion. The stumbling block still appears to be the understanding of *episcope*, the "ministry of pastoral leadership, cooperation and oversight." Perhaps the problem is not so much the definition of the word but rather the understanding of the authority of the church in relation to it. Stereotypes and misunderstandings still plague the churches, and an aura of mystery mixed with misinformation still persists.

In the *Niagara Report* the writers attempt to rediscover the richness beneath the term *episcope* and to engage the churches in a discussion of its meaning in relation to mission, making specific proposals for reform to pave the way for full communion. In order to understand the practical steps suggested in this document, it is important to note the distinction the writers make between *episcope* (defined above) and the *historic episcopate*, an

unbroken sequence of bishops which traces its origins back through history to at least the end of the second century. "Apostolic succession" refers to "the apostolicity of the church in faith."

This study guide has been designed as a way of enabling those in parishes and dioceses/synods to consider how to take those practical steps on the journey described in the *Niagara Report*. This journey involves embracing a greater vision of church and drawing closer to the goal of full communion. This study guide offers one way to educate Lutherans and Anglicans about the theological dialogue between the two traditions and to challenge them to respond. The sections that follow provide guidance for the leader and participants so that they can utilize the study guide effectively.

Objectives

The suggested objectives for the entire course are:

1. To demonstrate the urgency of defining the church in relation to its mission.
2. To illustrate that Anglicans and Lutherans can speak with one voice on certain truths that they share.
3. To outline ways to communicate the gospel in a contemporary culture while remaining faithful to the biblical message, especially as that relates to the ministry of oversight *(episcope)*.

Primary Resources

1. *The Niagara Report: Report of the Anglican-Lutheran Consultation on Episcope 1987*. London: Church House Publishing, 1988.
2. *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. Faith and Order Paper No. 110. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982.

Personnel

The study guide is written for adult small study groups. It is helpful to have trained leaders to begin the study process, but leadership might eventually rotate among group members. Although group members may be at different points in their knowledge and understanding of Lutheran and Anglican traditions, the material can be adapted to the level and interest of the group.

Settings

The material may be adapted to a variety of settings, but is designed primarily for joint study groups with Lutherans and Anglicans at the parish and diocesan/synodical level. It could also be used at the regional level if provisions are made for small group discussions. If the model of ecumenical dialogue is used, participants may be able to recreate the kinds of experiences shared by members of the Anglican-Lutheran Consultation. The guide can be used for discussion in Sunday church school classes or adult forums, Bible study groups, and retreats.

Description of the Sessions

The study guide includes five sessions with each following the theme of a major section in the document. The guide is to be used with the *Niagara Report*. It is suggested that the leader follow the sessions in order, as they are designed, to follow the schema of the document.

Session Plan

The session should begin with devotions including prayers, biblical texts, and hymns as noted above. In presenting the material, the leader should do the following:

- Create an atmosphere which fosters sharing and dialogue.
- Start with the experience of the participants, encouraging them to share their stories of the gospel.
- Make an effort to inform participants through a collegial, cooperative model of learning.
- If the group is large, make a presentation in a plenary session with discussions following in small groups.

Flexibility

In groups with a strong interest in history, Session Two may actually require two sessions. In groups more interested in problems faced by churches today, Session Four and Session Five will evoke more extensive discussion than their briefer treatment in the Study Guide may suggest.

Session One: The Nature of the Church and its Mission

(Niagara Report, paragraphs 11-14)

Focus Questions:

1. This section focuses on the importance of connections in understanding the nature of the church and its mission. How do you connect and communicate with others in your Christian community? What happens when communication breaks down? How do you restore the connections?
2. How does your own story connect with the story of the people of God and how they live in God's world?

Objectives:

1. To define apostolicity;
2. to describe the nature of the New Testament community and what it teaches us about ministries of pastoral leadership, coordination and oversight;
3. to illustrate how authority serves the mission of the church.

Commentary:

There are many ideas packed into these few pages that discuss the nature of the church and its mission. Each idea is a building block for the next. There are at least fifteen different ideas that are connected to each other. In one sense, the design is similar to what the text is saying about ministry in the New Testament community. All the ideas are essential for a discussion of the church and its mission, but the authority behind the words is the

Scriptural passages throughout. In the New Testament community, the gifts of each person were absolutely essential to the ministry of the community to each other and to the world. There had to be someone in the community who had authority and took responsibility for all members.

Here then are several key ideas already. First, in defining the nature of the church and its mission, it can be said, not only that it is necessary to understand the New Testament model, but also that the characteristics of that community, both good and bad, are characteristic of our Christian community today. People in the community have many gifts for ministry that are to be used in fulfilling the mission of the church through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. All of these persons and their gifts are essential to the community, and through the Holy Spirit help in proclaiming the gospel.

It is also necessary to have those with authority in the community who exercise leadership in such a way that their authority works for the good of the community rather than becoming authoritarian. There were conflicts and tensions in the New Testament community just as there are in the Christian community today. Decisions must be made that require that disciplinary action be taken for the sake of preserving the love and mission of Jesus Christ. In these kinds of situations, leadership among those who minister to others is necessary and was present in the early community.

All this leads to a discussion of apostolicity and what is meant by apostolic succession. What are the characteristics of apostolicity? First of all it is part of the mission of the church and is considered to be a gift. It is relational, unifying, and enriching. It embodies Christ as the "fullness of love." It involves striving for the goal of unity in Christ which is both gift and task. It includes Christ as vulnerable and suffering. It claims a freedom to serve because of what God has done in Christ Jesus.

To be apostolic means to be part of the mission of the church which is to witness to the love given through Jesus Christ. The

church has always exercised some type of leadership, pastoral oversight, and coordination as a way of strengthening its community for witness and service. Apostolic succession does not necessarily mean a linear (an unbroken line) succession of bishops back to the apostles, rather it means a succession of faithfulness to the apostolic mission of the church.

The world sees death as the end of things; whereas the church sees its mission to proclaim the gospel (the good news of Jesus Christ) message that death has been defeated through the promises of the resurrection. The kingdom or reign of God language is appropriate to describe what apostolic mission is all about. Through what it does and who it is the church is to tell others what that reign of God is. The reign of God means that God is working in history and represents the beginning and the end of all things. That is the beginning and end in the sense of Alpha and Omega.

Why do we try to define the church? So that as the church we can be in solidarity in witness to the world. So that we know who we are and what we are to do. To be part of the story of the church is to be part of the story of the people of Israel. It means being vulnerable to temptations and abuses of all kinds and facing rejection even while working toward the fulfillment of the mission of the church. On the other hand it means being the recipient of God's abundant grace, and the beneficiary of the victory over death through Jesus' sacrificial love. To be part of the story of the church is to be part of the system of communication described in the *Niagara Report*, paragraph 16. Each connection is important for conveying the message of the church, that it is in the world to proclaim God's love.

For Reflection:

1. List several characteristics of apostolicity as it is defined in this section of the *Niagara Report*. What is the relationship between apostolicity and the mission of the church? What is your understanding of your own mission in relation to the church? How is your mission in your Christian community like "Christ's way of being in the world?"
2. How does your Christian community witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ? How is the story of the church like your own? What gifts have you been given for ministry?
3. Read the objectives for this session again. How do you think authority serves the mission of the church?

Session Two: Requirements for the Church's Mission

(Niagara Report, paragraphs 25-59)

Focus Questions:

1 What do you think is required of the church?

2. How would you describe the role of the church in the world today? What are the similarities between its role today and at other points in history?

3. What is meant by "faithfulness" and "faithlessness" in regard to the church?

Objectives:

1. To outline what is required for the church's mission;

2. to describe the nature of *koinonia (communio)* and the role of *episcope* in it;

3. to review some episodes in the development of the episcopal office.

Commentary:

The mission of the church is a gift given through Christ by his death and resurrection. The earlier section of this dialogue report notes that for the Christian death is not the final answer. Because of the promise of the resurrection Christians do not have to worry about preserving themselves but are free to offer themselves in service as Christ did. In that first section of the report, the reason for defining the church was discussed. We

struggle with the church's identity so that we can be more effective in our Christian witness. In paragraph 25, the church is defined as "a sign, an instrument and a foretaste of the kingdom of God." Through Christ's gift of the church and its mission, we are able to consider the following requirements:

Doxology. This refers to the requirement that the church praise, honor, and worship the triune God. In these acts of thanksgiving, the Christian community acknowledges Christ's sacrifice on the cross and with a living hope looks forward to the fulfillment of the promise of salvation. The primary elements of this praise are baptism and eucharist. Through baptism, Christians are made part of the community of believers, and through the eucharist, they partake of the banquet that signifies that they are part of Christ and his mission.

Continuity. As we have said, God calls the church into an apostolic mission. God is faithful and promises to continue to love the church and the community of believers. God calls the church into faithfulness and continuity. God has been faithful to the church even when the symbols, word and sacraments, and the leadership of bishops have been manipulated and distorted. God's gospel calls for repentance and reconciliation.

Disciplined Life Together as a Community of Disciples. Jesus proclaimed the message of love to the disciples and asked that they, through their community, send it to the world. Being part of the community of disciples requires leading a disciplined life. With that comes admonition, calling attention to areas where a disciple has not lived up to obligations as a community member. The community members are to support one another so that the community has wholeness and unity. As the community of disciples, the church is called to love and care for its members so that *koinonia* (communion, community) is present and visible.

Nurture. As Christians we are the "little flock" trying to witness to God's love. The role of the shepherd or shepherds in that flock is just as important as it was in the earliest Christian communities and throughout church history, especially in times of

severe abuses in the church and the consequent reformations. This section describing nurture as a requirement for mission also highlights an idea from the first section of the dialogue report. To nurture a community means that the gifts of each of its members are recognized and used to strengthen the witness of the entire community. This is especially true when it comes to the "little ones." As each member uses his or her gift for shepherding, the "little flock" reaches out to the world.

Direction and Goal. The church does have a vision of the future that was given through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The story of the church is the story of Jesus' life and ministry. We know how the story of the church will end. What we do not know is exactly how the mission of the church will affect the world. If the church neglects the poor and downtrodden of the world, it is failing in its task of spreading Christ's love. It is not fully participating in the eucharistic meal (the Lord's Supper). It has lost sight of its apostolic mission. From time to time the church is bound to fail in its mission. It is at this point that *episcope* has the task of bringing about renewal and reform.

Development of Structure. The preceding sections have described requirements of the church's mission - the praise of the community, its faithfulness and continuity, its disciplined life together, its activity of nurture, and its sense of goal and direction. The requirements were important for the ancient church as well as the church that followed, and they continue to be important for the church today. They have become marks of the church as it struggles to witness to God's love. There is no single pattern of leadership to be found in the early Christian communities. Although the environment in which the church exists changes, good leadership is always necessary.

Paragraphs 42 through 58 sketch the development of structured ministry beginning with the New Testament, continuing through the Reformation to the present day. They attempt brief answers to such questions as:

- How would one describe early Christian communities?
- What problems were involved in handling the tension between the local and the universal?
- How did the categories of clergy and laity develop?
- What is the threefold ministry and what did it look like?
- Why was the office of bishop valued and what were its advantages?
- What constitutes the heart of the episcopal office?
- What is the bishop's role in preserving *koinonia (communio)?*
- Why should ordained ministry no longer be a church-dividing issue between Anglicans and Lutherans?

Section III of the *Niagara Report* seeks to demonstrate that there is a commonly held apostolic faith. Neither tradition can reject the apostolic nature of the other. Since the bishop reflects both universal and local *koinonia,* those who exercise the office of *episcope* should not be separated.

For Reflection:

1. How can a review of the development of structures help in understanding the threefold ministry, the nature of the apostolic tradition, and *koinonia*?
2. How has the role of bishop changed throughout history? Why is the history of that role not necessarily "normative" for the church today?
3. How does the New Testament describe the "ministry?"
4. What are the requirements of the church's mission?

Session Three: The Truths We Share

(Niagara Report, paragraphs 60-80)

Focus Questions:

1. What is a truth in your life? We talk about having facts about a situation. We assume that they are true. We talk about stories that are true. What does truth mean in that sense? Something that is right or wrong, true or false?
2. How are truths different from attitudes and beliefs? Can truths change? Is there a truth in your life that would never change?

Objectives:

1. To outline the truths that Anglicans and Lutherans share according to the official conversations between the two churches;
2. to compare your own understanding of what the two traditions share with the truths described in Section III.

Commentary:

In describing Anglican-Lutheran relations, it is difficult to paint a picture. If one were to do so, the portrait would be a mixture of textures and shapes. The picture would have to reveal, in all its complexities, that Anglicans and Lutherans cannot claim any divisive theological or doctrinal controversies. They have not condemned each other. What they can claim are large areas of agreement in faith and life. The affirmations of this section amount to a common confession of faith.

In addition to the common beliefs or shared truths, the members of the dialogue team that produced the *Niagara Report* made the following affirmations (an affirmation here refers to a positive assertion or validation):

1. We recognize a commitment to apostolic mission in each other's churches.
2. Through baptism we are united in our thankfulness for Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.
3. We acknowledge each other's ministries of *episcope.*
4. We confess to God that we have broken the unity of apostolic succession.
5. We want to remove barriers to unity.
6. We commit ourselves to a common witness to the gospel.
7. We wish to promote unity with all churches with whom we have discovered or are seeking to discover the catholic faith.
8. We celebrate a rediscovery of faith, life and unity within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

Another instructive example is found in the USA where Anglicans and Lutherans have entered into an agreement of "interim eucharistic sharing." The following phrases highlight the truths agreed upon in the official conversations:

1. We believe in the authority of the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.
2 We accept the Niceno-Constantinopolitan and Apostles' Creed and confess the Trinity.
3. We use similar orders of service.
4. We believe in baptism with water in the name of the Trinity.
5. We believe that Christ is truly present in the Lord's Supper.
6. We believe and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

7. We believe the church is sustained through the triune God and is a sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God.
8. We believe that all members of the church have a role in its apostolic mission. We believe the ordained ministry is a gift of God to the churches and of divine institution.
9. We believe in a ministry of pastoral oversight *(episcope).*
10. We share a common hope for the final coming of the kingdom of God and believe we must work for peace and justice.
11. We believe that "there are no longer any serious obstacles on the way toward the establishment of full communion between our two churches."

For Reflection:

1. Review the list of "truths" from this section. How do they compare with the Nicene and Apostles creeds? Which ones do you think are the most important for unity between Lutherans and Anglicans? Why? Are there any that you think are not important? If so, which ones?
2. You have been asked by a Christian, who is neither Anglican nor Lutheran, to explain what Lutherans and Anglicans have in common. What will you say?

Session Four: Applications to Anglicans and Lutherans

(Niagara Report, paragraphs 81-110)

Focus Questions:

1. What is your understanding of leadership, oversight, or *episcope* in your Christian community? In what ways is it working? In what ways does it need to be changed?
2. What are some of the questions you have about *episcope?* What is the connection between oversight as you have experienced it and the church's Christian witness?

Objectives:

1. To name what needs to be reformed in the Lutheran as well as the Anglican understanding of *episcope* for the sake of our Christian witness;
2. to describe the patterns of leadership in the church that will be necessary for the future.

Commentary:

This section calls for some visioning about what the church will be like for Anglicans and Lutherans in the future. It deals with the theological crux of the Anglican-Lutheran discussion regarding bishops. It calls for a critical evaluation of the existing forms of *episcope.* Lutherans and Anglicans can look at each other and suggest where they think changes in oversight should occur because they see in each other a church that is faithful to the apostolic gospel. How is this faithfulness demonstrated?

For Lutherans:

- Creeds of the early church,
- "The Lutheran Confessions" of the sixteenth century,
- continuity of the ordained ministry through which the word of God has been preached and the sacraments and rites of the churches have been administered.

For Anglicans:

- Creeds of the early church,
- Book of Common Prayer from the sixteenth century (revised periodically and adapted regionally),
- continuity of the episcopal office through which clergy have been ordained for the preaching of the word of God and the administration of the sacraments and rites of the church.

While one might expect Anglicans and Lutherans to change somewhat if they enter into full communion with one another, each tradition (Anglican or Lutheran) will be expected to make specific changes in regard to *episcope.* These changes are described in paragraphs 88 to 98 of the *Niagara Report.*

When in a spirit of trust, a church poses questions to an ecumenical partner about faithfulness in leadership, that church also has an opportunity for self-examination. The questions in paragraphs 100-109 are appropriate for both Lutherans and Anglicans as they suggest that the two churches will be concerned about a common pattern of leadership in the future based on mutual reform.

For Reflection:

1. Why does faithfulness to the gospel give the two churches freedom to change their patterns of leadership for the sake of mission?
2. Review the changes that each of the two churches are asked to make in order to enter into full communion (see paragraphs 88-98). Which ones are the most difficult to make or the easiest? Choose one and discuss how it might affect your particular community?
3. What are your images of leadership for the church in the future? What is most likely to change? What is least likely to change? How will these new images of leadership bring Lutherans and Anglicans together? Is there any way in which they could separate

Session V: Practical Steps

(Niagara Report, paragraphs 111-115)

Focus Questions:

1. Why is the term "steps" used to refer to a movement toward full communion?
2. Tell the story of your experience with an Anglican-Lutheran project or relationship. Does it fit into any of the steps described in this section?

Objectives:

1. To describe where your community is on the journey and to recall your successes as well as your failures;
2. to list practical steps you have taken and plan to take.

Commentary:

When and how these steps are taken depends in part on the local situation. Where do joint programs already exist? Where is it particularly appropriate to recognize each other's ministries? As more and more success stories are told and models and prototypes develop, imaginations will be sparked to create new ways to travel toward full communion using the steps outlined.

For Reflection:

1. What does Christian unity look like in your locale?
2. What has your pilgrimage been like? Where do you see your journey leading in the future?